SORRY TO MISS YOU

Franziska Hofhansel

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p r e s s

no. 06 | 2023

Sorry to Miss You
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Dead Mall Press pays writers 50% of all earnings. An additional percentage is donated to mutual aid, anti-carceral, and social justice organizations. More information can be found at rmhaines.com/deadmallpress. Contact: deadmallpress@gmail.com

Cover image from WikiMedia Commons.

Fonts include Old Newspaper Type (various sizes for titles and frontmatter) and Bembo Standard (9-11 point).

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Sorry to Miss You

I'll tell you two stories: one about the fish and one about the bats. Fish hate golf. I have a psychic connection to fish and they tell me all the time, *We hate golf!* I'm telling you all this because your head is against my neck where the blood goes through and I'm stroking your hair and want to say to you, for no reason at all, that everything is going to be alright. I want to say, *I'm going out of my mind with affection. This feels like grief, what we're doing, only I can't say why. I am happier than I have ever been. I'm terrified. There are moths in my brain flopping around like alligators, chewing through all the wire, they're taking bites out of my hippocampus like it's a crazed nun or unhappy tomato. Do you wish I had face tattoos like all your ex-girlfriends?* Instead I say, "Do you want to know what fish do after 9 PM on Saturdays?" and you say "Okay," so I explain that fish are really into golf assassinations. Golf assassinations? They kill golfers. It's part of a very complicated geopolitical scheme to decolonize North America. And how do fish kill golfers, exactly? They make friends with moths. You know how people always say to keep moths away from wool because they'll chew holes in it? Well it's the same with brains. Moths love to fly through your ears into your brain and chew on all the electrical tape and wires. They used to do that when I snorted my prescription and never slept. Anyway, how the fish get you is they tell the moths to chew a path in your brain all the way down to your heart so the fish can swim into your chest cavity and eat it. And then you have a fish where your heart's supposed to be flopping around like an alligator! The kind of people who play golf are not the kind of people who can handle having a fish where their heart's supposed to be. They die on the spot. You say, "I never thought of alligators as being particularly floppy," and I say, "Clearly you've never had a fish in your chest cavity."

I think if I were easier to love maybe I'd have a heart instead of a fish.

⋆

I might be pregnant. All the Jesus pictures in your living room have been watching us fuck without condoms for weeks now and I still can't tell if that's pity in their eyes or admiration.

When you were on the phone with your friend who went to prison for murder you referred to me as *the girl that I'm seeing.* Which could mean anything. If you saw the same girl every time you sobbed by the train station in Galesburg, Illinois, couldn't you say she was *the girl that I'm seeing?* Do you ever feel so lonely you can't breathe? If you cry at gas stations, if you feel gas stations hate you, if you love gas stations and feel that they hate you with a kind of corrosive violence that if unmoored could bring Jesus back to life, and every time you bike past the gas station by Walgreens you see a girl in a green coat with a face tattoo that says *FISH HATE GOLF*, and you suspect this girl might be a ghost, could you tell your mother about *this girl that I'm seeing?* Do you ever wish you were easy to love?

⋆

There was the time I did shrooms at someone's birthday party and walked to your apartment at two in the morning. I took the Blue Creek trail, which is very beautiful and without streetlights and which happens to take you into parts of town where I sense that if you scream no one can hear, and if anyone does I don't think they'd care. My phone died. It was pitch black and in my head was a movie about a purple farmhouse made of eyes. I loved the house. I wanted to be invited in. Soon there was another movie about a man made of fish in love with a train. He was sitting by the railroad sobbing. I was halfway to your home and I saw a light and a man coming towards me. The man was cruel hungry. He didn't see me. He took a turn before he could pass by. I don't want to die. At one point in my life I thought

I did, but not anymore. When I got to your home I collapsed in your arms and said, *Can you tell me everything's going to be OK?* and you made me a salami sandwich.

★

Here's the story about bats: 6,000 years ago a bat named Dima Andronikov got lost searching for a walrus in Antarctica and spent his birthday alone. By the time he returned to his colony of bats in what is now Argentina, he found that his friends had forgotten his birthday entirely, not a belated birthday wish to be found. Dima—already on the brink of mental collapse due to his failure to find the walrus Luba Babkin, the reincarnation of his former wife—sank into a depressive episode so bleak he nearly died. In fact he did die, though not technically from the depression—in late August he dreamed that Luba the walrus told him to search for her in the sea. *You won't drown*, she promised, *my love will protect you.*

Her love did not protect him. Dima wrote a long letter detailing where and why he'd gone, and did not neglect to mention the birthday mishap that had pushed him to the brink. He left the letter on the kitchen table for his girlfriend Karina to find and three weeks later they discovered his body washed up on shore. From that moment forward, his friends vowed never to let another bat spend a birthday alone.

They formed the Birthday Bat Committee (BBC), an association of bats dedicated to keeping track of the birthdays of every bat in the world and ensuring that none of these birthdays were ever endured alone. Of course this was not easy: for many years they struggled to stay organized, to keep their many promises. They began to teach bats ways to signal to one another from afar, in case a bat was ever without company on their birthday and needed the BBC to come find them. And that's how echolocation was invented.

I told this story to my friend Mia two years ago because I asked her *Do you ever think about how sometimes bats spend their birthdays alone?* and she started crying so I made this story up and

promised her I was wrong, nevermind, there hasn't been a lonely birthday bat in 6,000 years.

I'm telling you this story in part because of what you told me about your mother, how you held up your hand with all those tattoos I love and looked at me with drowning eyes. I didn't know you well enough at the time to hug you, though I wanted to very badly, and I remember later that night you held me in your arms and said we were like strangers, and we were, and you kissed me on the forehead and said *I think I could do this with you all the time*, and I fell asleep with your pulse exploding against my neck.

I don't know what we are or who I am to you or if you mean any of the things you say. I'm telling you this story anyway, because I like the way you hold your blue lighter like how I imagine an astronaut holds an egg and your glasses are falling apart and when I'm sad you stroke my hair and feed me salami and the time you accidentally elbowed my shin you looked at me in horror and said you were so, so sorry, and I had to explain it didn't even hurt, you barely touched me, and I saw something collapse in you and you looked at me like I was something precious and strange. I would tell you this story even if I thought you hated me, because I want you to know that you deserve a birthday committee too.

elegy for unknown recipient

December 19, 2018
2:44 PM EST
To: Natalie
From: Caroline
Subject: i wish i knew if you kept me?

i keep having this dream. i'm in bed wearing nothing but sandals and sea glass earrings from the store on main st with that beautiful man and his vicious cats and i'm lying there like this and i don't look pretty or anything because my makeup's fucked up from somewhere--crying maybe--and there's a woman in the bed with these awful shoes, Natalie, awful, orange and clacking like a fucking puppet if only puppets could clack and she's on top of me i hear her breathing and she grabs my neck, she's got these vile nails and she whispers in my ear--she has an ugly voice, Natalie, like how you think a train might talk--she says I LOVE YOU I HAVE BEEN A CHILD ALL MY LIFE WITH NO EARS IT IS A TERRIBLE THING TO BE AN ANGEL WITH NO TONGUE OR GORILLA GLUE IT IS A TERRIBLE THING MY LOVE YOU MUST SEE

and I wake up and i swear Natalie i swear to god or whoever watches the monks in their terrible dreams i wake up wearing nothing and it doesn't matter if i went to bed the night before in a dress or hula hoop or whatever your fancy i'm naked and wearing nothing but sea glass earrings from the main st store with the beautiful man.

i keep thinking it is unusual to be so afraid. i keep thinking someone somewhere knows everything about me and they hate me, they think i'm awful, they think at the core of me is something ugly and mean, a centipede's guts or helpless crook maybe and i think about that woman

and her ugly voice and how lonely she sounded, really, how that was what made it ugly, that unbearable loneliness.

when i was fifteen i knew a boy in the drama club with bangs and endearing ears and no one liked him, Natalie, no one at all, and when i asked a friend about him she told me it was that terrible need for companionship which drove everyone away. you can smell it on him, she said. you can smell it on some people. the loneliness i mean.

i have a theory about loneliness. i keep having this dream. i'm in bed with no clothes combing my eyelash with a little comb and this woman crawls in, she doesn't use the door she is on the ceiling with green shoes and her eyes are somewhere else like an island in south america maybe i don't know and i like her eye sockets, black like she filled them in with charcoal or fancy face wash and she looks at me, as best she can with no eyes she looks at me she is on the ceiling still and i am somewhere near, the bed floating or simply disengaged and i come closer, she holds out her two hands like a beggar or pleading troubador she is trying to speak and i don't let her and she cups my chin with her two hands which are wrong somehow, too rough and too small and she touches my face like a man in the movies she touches my left ear and my crooked nose and the mole i never got removed and we stay like this, i let her look at me in the way she does with no eyes she turns to the ceiling and i reach out for her hands which are all wrong, somehow, i didn't know hands could be so wrong and i didn't know you could look at someone with no eyes.

there is a bluebird outside my window with the most beautiful wings, Natalie, and i think you would love her. you have always loved small things.

sometimes when i'm fucking a man or being fucked by a man with no ears and three mouths i am thinking of something someone once told me about lobsters and how it broke my heart completely. they

have no vocal cords, Natalie, these silly fish, crustaceans, what have you, and when they die--boiled alive, i mean, i know of no other death for the lobster, i know of no other way--they make this screaming noise, you understand, this awful screaming, only it isn't them really, or is, but they have no vocal cords and can't scream like you or i because it doesn't come from that place and i know you know what place i mean, you felt it in amsterdam, we felt it in amsterdam, but what good does it do the lobster to have that place inside if they can't scream, if that noise you hear is only air bursting out of small holes in their small bodies as they leave this world behind and there is no one left to love them, there is nothing left to bury.

i am doing well, in case you were wondering. i'm eating again. 2 meals a day. sometimes more. i sleep, or try to. mostly i lie there in agony. but i am in bed, which is what matters i think.

i know you think i should get therapy for some of my issues but i am doing just fine like this, and have been fine for a long time really even if you don't believe me. in my head is a movie about a man who has a girlfriend named sally and mostly he neglects her for his studies but a couple times he stops his research to sit on the bed and hold her in his arms and she lets him, almost, she's compliant, and once or twice she even turns to him and presses her thumb to his cheek, touches him like a dying animal you can't help but pity and when he tucks his hand behind her ear she strokes his collarbone and when he says SALLY SALLY YOU ARE THE ONLY THING THAT'S EVER MADE ME TRULY HAPPY SALLY YOU ARE THE ONLY THING I'VE EVER MISSED she stares at him like this is the first time anyone's ever spoken to her and she touches his knee and he stops breathing or maybe breathes faster, he can't tell.

if i built my house i should like to call you, Natalie, i would call you on the phone every night just to hear your voice like men do in movies, sometimes, only they don't mean it, and i would mean it. i

would call you in the mornings to say goodnight and i would call you at night to say i love you and i am not so different from the men in the movies, Natalie, the way they turn away, close their eyes like they've seen enough, already, enough, only i would keep loving you.

anyway. i hope you write me back someday.

The Untitled Fan Applauds the Grace of Epithet

I am all out of wine you see with nothing to do but walk across the country and I am stopped now in Blackbird, Delaware, having just left San Bernardino, California, and before that Bangor, Maine, and I have walked all over this night, I have seen berries growing and a Rubik's cube giving birth to a German shepherd and once or twice a man stopped me on this road to tell me he was very lost, and had I seen his pregnant Rubik's cube, he was worried sick for the poor dear, and I have seen a woman with the wildest farmer's tan you ever did see burying a paint chip, it was her mother she said, leukemia, and the treatment too expensive and I almost said to her something about sunscreen, I almost gave her my sunscreen, I almost said *Good luck*, I almost said *I almost drowned the other day in a puddle, my teeth came out the other night in a dream I feared was a metaphor for something unholy and I stopped by the church that morning to beg for salvation, I said I will do anything, I will give up sex, liquor, take my makeup off before bed, I will be good, Lord, I will be good again, and don't you know the good Lord never wrote me back, never came to me in a dream, don't you know I am 49 next week and think I look damn good so forget abstinence, only my teeth came out in another dream and I woke to all the lamps in my house doing cartwheels, We won't forgive you, they said, we won't forget how you refused to dance, how you murdered us all for your own peace and we won't forgive your laughter, your unabashed hunger in the face of things, and I have been walking ever since and when I see a silo I fall in love and do not forget to dance and still on occasion I hunger for things only I have been walking so very long, I think I am owed another chance, I think when I get out of here I will do things differently, yes, scratch the golf ball with my hooves, tell the man he owes me, gallop across the*

country in the night dressed like a movie star like I'm in love, like I've been loved before, like there is someone waiting for me up there in the velvet black only he wants me here, right now, so long as I come home to him eventually.

AN EXTRAORDINARY EXAMPLE OF 21ST CENTURY STATECRAFT

If I wanted consolation I would go I think to the river in North Pawtucket with the baseballs swimming around like knives and regretting as I do having borne witness to such catastrophe, having loved you all my life with no knees. Pardon my extremities. I will fish the baseballs out of the water with red lining and I will love you still with half an eye and trousers undone, the seams splitting as they do at the knee while I fish the bodies out of the water, yes, I lay them to rest under the sun, writhing as they do for the batting cage.

Once I was nineteen and wanted only simple things. A red car, a green knife, a fish to fry at a mother's wake. Once my lover tied her fishnets to a tree. Once my lover veers around fishing the stars out of her nostril till no one sees.

Oh if I wanted consolation I would not go to you, I would not touch the glass like this for the lake would scream so and once holy I will desert you, do what you want my love with your simple things, have your way with the stars, the dollar bill clogged in one nostril and let me go to the river, let me bury the bodies in peace. I will take my chances with the batting cage, the tapestry, the white lines sprawled across the sky *Like clouds* you say *No* I say *Like knives.*

Dialogue Between Cantaloupe and Paint Chip Next Door

i am a cantaloupe. the paint chip next door thinks i'm lying about my identity but it's the god-given truth: i am orange and i remind people of the sun. i grind water up with my gums and spit out the blood like toothpaste. i am very loveable. in my next life i will be a hurricane and i will kiss anyone i meet on the top of their foreheads like a lesbian lover or horrid ghost. i love teeth! in my life before this one i was a witch who stole teeth from children.

the paint chip next door can say what he wants. i have lived a very long time and he knows nothing of angels, laundromats, violent candy canes. i will be a ghost i will be a lover I WILL BE A THEATRE WITH 3 TONGUES AND NO NOSE I WILL BE AN ANGEL WITH TOOTHPASTE INSTEAD OF WINGS I WILL BE A CAULIFLOWER I WILL WORK FOR GOLDMAN SACHS AND I WILL QUIT MY JOB AND KILL THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES WITH A GODDAMN TRICYCLE AND WHAT WILL THE PAINT CHIP NEXT DOOR KNOW OF FALLING TO ONE'S KNEES IN ECSTACY? WHAT WILL HE KNOW OF LOVE? HOW WILL HE PRAY FOR MERCY WHEN HE HAS LIVED HIS WHOLE LIFE ON HIS KNEES? NONE OF YOU HAVE ANYTHING TO TEACH ME

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what i would give to be a sea horse floating in the rain on the devil's massive cock. i have fucked the devil. i have kissed a lion

with my hands. i am a delicate soul o wise and terrible god and i beg for penance. what will you have me do? will i drink the rain when the sea sobs its terrible songs in the wintertime? will i kiss the sun? will jesus save me if i refuse to repent? o lord i believe i believe i believe; fix my unbelief.

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the other canteloupes lie here beside me and tell me stories of the wintertime. the humans come, they say. the humans creep up like rain. they have long arms and fingernails like a tarantula. they come here one by one to touch our empty skulls, our blemishes, our joyful creases. they love us, or so they say. they turn us over. one human turns to another human and says, how do you feel about this one?

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THIS ONE HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THIS ONE HOW DO YOU FEEL ARE YOUR EYES FASTENED TO YOUR CHEST DO YOU THINK WE DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU WANT WITH US DO YOU THINK WE DON'T KNOW YOU CUT US OPEN, YOU KISS US, YOU FEED US TO YOUR LOVED ONES WE ARE NOT YOUR LOVED ONES WE ARE ONLY THE THINGS YOU SAY YOU LOVE LONG ENOUGH TO KEEP US ALIVE BEFORE YOU SUBJECT US TO TYRANNY. WELL I AM SICK OF IT.

THISISTHEBORDERBETWEENSLUTTYNUNHALLOWEENCOSTUMESANDGODSLOVEDONOTCROSSBORDERIREPEATDONOTCROSSBORDERDONOTCROSSBORDERDONOTCRO

i want to go to jail if for no other reason than i want to be the first paint chip in jail, i want to be alive, i want to be divine, will god will it so? lord hear my prayers.

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I WANT SO BADLY TO BE LOVED BY ANYONE WHO CAN SEE ME

Doctrine of No Surprises

This is the second time in my life I've cried
every day for at least a month. I am busy
waiting to be born again. I have heard
such miracles have something to do with water,
something to do with being cleansed, so I shower
thrice a day, I sob everywhere I can, I submerge
myself. Emily Dickinson said
once in a letter that her father had a pure
and terrible heart. I confess to foregoing
such attributes. I beg to be made
pure and terrible. I am of this world.
Hail Mary, full of grace. Say it again.

Formulas Love Reduction

"gift as the auto-
matic representation
of time. This still
praise of summer gone unnoticed—
must be economic, burning
as he did just to preserve
commodity—" And here's skin,
money, under all that flesh
and wrapper. Didn't your mother
ever tell you to sit up, don't you
still hoard that halloween candy,
those orange beads still clinging
to the stairs—no vice or virtue,
only what to say, who accomplishes
transaction; begrudge humility if it begs—
don't you still ask forgiveness, every time?

The great abundance and overlapping orbits of asteroids suggests that disruptive collisions

are nothing like intimacy, ask only that we
speak in falsetto, learn to walk on knives,
hijack airplanes and also television sets
of former lovers, presidents, myths. In Catholic school,

the nuns told us we were tethered
to our loved ones with invisible string. I used to touch
the small of my back to see if I could feel
the coil of rope sticking out of my spine. Mom said I shouldn't

listen to everything the nuns said, that even grownups
mistake words for meaning. You wish I would do the same, wish
I would allow for truth-telling and not
grounds for escape.

So Soft

She was young, thin, strangely elastic. Morally and physically flexible, Max concluded. These were not proven qualities, as yet only to be surmised from that callous, meandering gaze, the peculiar loping grace to her gait, how every motion of her limbs had a certain falsity to it, as if everything she did was somehow detached from origin, baseless. Oh—and she was lovely. That unruly brown hair, Cleopatra nose, satin skin. Max longed to touch and that was all, had a fleeting impulse to stroke her hair gently, whisper *So soft* in her ear, treat the girl with a perfect earnest tenderness. It wasn't as if he had asked for this—it was hardly Max's fault he'd been elected state representative and therefore deemed helpless, in immediate need of *resources* and *assistants* and *unpaid interns*, nor was it his fault that these interns were often so beautiful, so alarming.

Max was once paid a small college stipend to lecture incoming freshmen on matters of moral hygiene. College RAs were required to coordinate sessions on consent, on unhealthy relationships, on the dangers of power imbalance. Max was very good at this being naturally thoughtful, quite interested in feminist issues, and an adept accumulator of political buzzwords. He duly enlightened his peers about the *problematics* of *inherent transgression* and *implicit violence* and *the trauma of womanhood*. Max explained how consent must always be clear and coherent and never extracted or ever articulated from some hierarchical positioning. Certain relationships, Max enlightened his younger peers, are transactional, and to devolve into newer areas—erotic territory unfounded, the border crossing of ill-advised adventurism—is necessarily to breach the social contracts which guarantee good behavior.

In his twenties, Max had really and truly believed these things. At forty-five, he wanted very badly to breach every social

contract known to man, to behave despicably, horribly, with irrepressible joy. Mostly, he really wanted to fuck Grace.

Grace was nineteen and ethically ambivalent. She wore red cashmere sweaters that clashed with her pale skin and dark eyes and intimated their own warning to the curious. Max suspected she might be anorexic—she was so thin, refused to eat in public, only consumed black coffee before an audience, no matter how many pastries he laid out during meetings—but perhaps it was only that cultivated boredom of hers which suggested control issues. At any rate, he liked her thinness for it made her seem delicate and deliciously indifferent. Max also liked indifferent women. He secretly hoped that Grace *was* anorexic—the illness would give them something to talk about, offer opportunities to express concern, introduce emotionally devastating elements to their interaction. Perhaps at home she read books about women with eating disorders. He'd recommend Sarah Gerard to her—Grace might like the odd, looping prose, all those strange and insistent metaphors for psychological decay.

Were these the observations of a delusional, pathetic man? Not necessarily. Max had an elaborate theory about a link between Excel spreadsheets and the psyche, and he had never once been proven wrong. In truth, everything you needed to know about a person—her tendency to cry, her childhood trauma, her Electra Complex--might be revealed through her data entry technique. Sally, for instance—an erstwhile secretary of his who behaved with such refined tenderness he could hardly stand to look at her—had decided issues with pasting things where they belonged. She could copy text fine, but switch to another tab with the correct spreadsheet and she habitually forgot where it went and could scarcely distinguish between axes. This habitual failure to reconcile, tendency to unsee and unmake, suggested serious abandonment issues. Sally didn't care to contemplate transitions because she'd been left by someone as a child—a father, most likely. Fathers were always leaving. And Max had been proven right. Six months into her employment, Sally mentioned, in passing, that she'd been adopted. It was in response to

something he had said—she was worried about him, suspected issues at home, wanted him to know she would listen, if need be, and would extend compassion—but she'd informed him so casually it was immediately, painfully evident that her revelation was anything but casual. *Oh—I'm adopted.* You didn't say *Oh* like that if things were fine. Max had to let Sally go eventually when her secretarial shortcomings proved insurmountable.

Grace had different issues. There were no particular secretarial skills in which she lacked expertise—she was simply terrible at everything. Her incompetence was so total it seemed engineered. Grace didn't care if things were wrong, would clumsily drag cells in whichever direction she felt like, and she would cut and paste text with so little discretion that Max felt it was no small miracle that her mistakes were remotely correctable.

Indeed, the girl gave so little attention to matters of control and organization, in fact, that Max became quite unnerved. Clearly this endemic carelessness bespoke only an insatiable need for order. In her recognition that nothing could be perfect, Grace had decided nothing *would* be perfect. So all must be disordered, random, mistaken. Terrifying. Truly bizarre.

Consequently, Max resolved to seduce her. Grace was sadistic, he was sure of it. No one could enter data in such a haphazard way without harboring cruel and unusual impulses.

Max began to buy her things. One morning her hair-tie broke. The next, he came into the office with a pack of colorful scrunchies from the drugstore next door and laid it before her on her desk as an offering. Grace was coolly grateful. Their hands brushed.

Max bought her zero-calorie bubble gum, lemon drops, copper bobby pins. During breaks he knocked on her cubicle and inquired about the progress of her work—did she need any help? He was happy to oblige, if so. She declined his offers but did not send him away, choosing instead to discuss with him television debacles, political mishaps, sports matches gone awry. Once—in the midst of an intriguing exchange about elements of fascism in publicly funded

children's television shows—Grace touched his arm and smiled. She left her hand on his arm for what felt like several minutes.

"Have you read anything on Machiavelli?" Max asked.

Grace shook her head.

"You might like him. He writes about power, and he's not—well, I wouldn't recommend reading him directly. Not worth it. The language is sort of a bother. But people have written some interesting things about him. There's this one writer—I can't remember his name off the top of my head--but he dissects, um, governmental forces as a form of coercion, does this whole big thing with seduction, persuasion, you know. I can't recall the name of the book either. But I have it in my office. Somewhere in there I think. If you wanted to borrow it, maybe."

"Sure," Grace said, her pupils darting about like savage fish. "Yeah. I'd like that. I haven't read anything good in a while. Too busy inputting things, I guess."

"Well, that's too bad." Max frowned with a suitably paternal concern. "I don't want to keep you so busy. Don't want to disrupt your education."

"Oh, I go to art school. I'm hardly disrupted."

"Isn't art all about disruption?" Max asked, with a knowing smile.

"How's that?"

Max didn't know. He guided Grace down the hall instead. His office reeked of permanent markers and peppermint. She closed the door behind them.

"Where do you keep your books?"

"Under the desk." Max was suitably chagrined. "I don't want—well, you know, it's a bit awkward if Senator Mulhern walks in and sees, like, a poetry book or something on the table. Poetry books always have such weird titles these days. People might start to think you're not serious, that you just kind of lounge about in here all day, reading weird shit."

"Don't you?"

Grace smiled offhandedly at him, fiddling with a miniature stapler on his desk. The stapler clicked and a little staple spun to the carpet. Max could not stop looking at her.

"I didn't know you liked to read so much," she said. "I thought you were more into, like, visual performance, or whatever. You talk about movies so much."

"Not really."

"Like, all the time."

"No, I like to read."

"Good for you. I'll help you look for it, if that's alright."

"Look for what?"

"Your book."

"Right."

"What color is it?" Grace knelt beside him on the carpet, scouring his collection.

"Green, I think." Max knocked over a pile. "Or red."

"Oh!" Her face rearranged itself with pleasure. "You have *Jane Eyre.* I love that book."

"I haven't read it, to be perfectly honest with you. It was a gift."

"Well, you should."

"I know the plot," Max informed her, ridiculously.

"There's this one line—Jane's talking to Rochester, the big love interest, and he wants to marry her, and he says 'You—you strange, you almost unearthly thing! You, Jane, I must have you.' I mean, Jesus."

"I must have you," Max repeated, robotically.

"Yeah," Grace said, excitedly. "Unearthly thing. Like, Jesus, you know?"

Max really did know. He was noticing that Grace's mascara was lumpy in places and resembled a particularly horrific spider, and also that her forehead was beginning to break out in small red bumps like a rubber bath mat.

"Is this it?"

Grace held up *A Study of Discourses* in her small, peeling hands. Max ought to buy her lotion. They had tubes of it in the drugstore next to the scrunchies.

"Yes. That's it."

"Great. You're very sweet, Max. Thanks for letting me borrow it." Her thumb brushed his shoulder as she turned to leave. "I'll let you know how it goes."

Come back.

★

Slowly, the girl began to drive him insane. She was always touching him—albeit discreetly, a brush of fingers so light it felt like nothing so much as a leaf resting on his skin, barely palpable—but would not be seduced by him. Max tried touching her back. He bought her earrings, ballpoint pens, pocket-sized sketchpads. Still she resisted.

Grace still came into his office frequently, befuddled by a spreadsheet or a copier jam—and was always sure to close the door behind her, crinkling her eyebrows in that odd, inviting way—but only ever to talk. Max might look, but never touch.

One Friday she came in bearing a large book in hand. A photograph collection, she announced. Some German artist; she couldn't pronounce the name. It was German too. She sat down on the purple carpeting beside his desk where his piles of books declined and fell, her head resting against the metallic edge, the book open in her lap, and motioned for Max to join her on the floor. He did.

"I don't know much about photography," he admitted, hunkering down.

"Oh, that's alright. Some of these aren't that great, honestly. Like in these landscape ones he gets a bit weird with color, and this one of the bridge—oh, I don't like that one much. He knew how to work with people though. I mean, that was really his thing, why I find him so interesting." She paused, tucked a strand of staticky hair behind an ear. Max fought the urge to take her in his arms. She was

so fragile-looking and exuded so much false vulnerability. "People always have that stupid fucking philosophy about pictures—you know, if you take a picture of someone, it needs to, like, *say something.* Needs to be about their interior. Capture their soul, reveal some strange and intimate detail, describe a relationship." She talked like this sometimes: these strange, winding monologues, vaguely unhinged, nothing behind the words but a desperation to seem alive and unwell. This girl wanted very badly to be loved. "Well, that's fucking stupid, and he knew it. Talked about it in an interview this one time. 'That's not what I'm doing,' he said, basically. He was like, 'It's not about trying to capture a person's *truth,* it's about visually organizing the image so that a face becomes compelling and unpredictable.' Well, something like that, anyhow. And he's right, you know? Like how weird and fucked up is that, to think you can capture someone's *essence* through physical presentation? What an awful thing to want."

"People want a lot of awful things," Max whispered, meaningfully at her.

Grace stared at him, blank and unsmiling. "I want awful things for myself. I don't want them for other people."

The girl seemed to really mean this, and Max was unsettled by the fervor of her assertion. Surely her eating disorder—and she must have one, he was sure of it, where else might her obsession with one's *essence* degraded through *physical presentation* arise?—was merely misdirected meanness, a singular defamation of the world. Wasn't such deprivation a rejection of intimacy, a declaration of solitude? His own mother had been anorexic, and he was more than certain such psychological motivations applied to *her.* She used to hold him in her arms and press her fingernails hard against his skin, leaving little marks everywhere, half-moons that broke through the epidermis layer, sometimes bled.

"I find that hard to believe," Max told her.

Grace commenced shaking slightly, a mild tremor visible in her left hand. He'd noticed this before and assumed her nervousness

performed, calculated to elicit response. Now he was beginning to wonder. Maybe she was sick in body as well as mind.

She inched closer to him. Max could feel her breath soft on his cheek. "Can I tell you something?"

"Of course." Max inclined towards her, awaiting the revelation of a secret self.

"Did you know lobsters have two stomachs, and that's where they keep their teeth?"

"No, I didn't know that."

"Oh." Grace looked rather pleased with herself. "You should read about it sometime. It's really fascinating." She yawned. "You want to know something else about lobsters?"

Max pressed his fingers into the carpet till they hurt. "Okay."

"People are always, like, conjecturing or whatever about, you know, whether they feel pain or not. They want to feel good about themselves, right? And so it'd be very convenient to convince themselves that lobsters don't feel anything when they're being boiled alive. Which is ridiculous, you know, for a whole bunch of reasons." Grace leaned back, pressing her knee against his thigh. Despite the current conversation, Max was mildly aroused. "I mean, first of all, what about emotional pain? It's not enough to ask about their physical conditions. Shouldn't you be worried about their conceptions of mortality?"

"The lobsters?"

"The awful loneliness of dying in a metal pot, surrounded by your own kind and yet so, so alone? The, like, existentialist crisis of it."

"I suppose," Max said, unsure to what degree he was amused or horrified. He was beginning to feel oddly affectionate towards Grace. It was hard not to care for someone so strange.

"Well, here's the thing. Have you ever heard a lobster scream?" Her voice had become again painfully earnest.

"Not to my knowledge, no."

"Well, I have. You never forget. It's a chilling sound, absolutely chilling. But they're not technically screaming. They have no vocal cords, so they can't express pain like you or I. So that sound they make—this awful, dying screeching as they overheat—it's actually from expanding air rushing out of small holes in their bodies. Like whistles. You realize what that means?"

Max mulled this for a minute or so. "No."

"It means a dead lobster can scream as loudly as a living one." She stared at him. Grace seemed to be engaged in searching for someone else in his eyes. "You see what I mean, don't you?"

"About the lobsters?"

Max saw that her arms were coated in goosebumps. Grace reached up and stroked his cheek, her fingertips grazing stubble. Max leaned in and kissed her. She let him. God, she let him. His hands groped to unbutton her blouse, went clawing behind her back, almost succeeded in unhooking her bra. But she pulled away. "No. Hold on." She cradled his chin gently in her hands. "I'm not going to fuck you, Max. You're not the kind of man I sleep with."

"I could make you," he offered, tentatively.

Grace smiled sadly at him, a consoling look. "Oh, but I don't think you want to make me. I don't really think you want to be cruel, Max."

Still she was holding him tender as a shell. He lay there, counting each individual lash framing her dark, dark eyes.

"What kind, then?" he ventured, after a while of the lash counting. "What kind of men do you sleep with?"

"Oh, it's nothing too niche or anything. I just have to be able to picture—well, I have this house in my head, right? And I think of me inside this house, and I think of the man inside this house, and I think of this house burning. And I ask myself: if I was tied to the bed, would the man leave me inside? Like, with full knowledge that I can't escape without his help, and with full knowledge that even if he helped me, it would only take a couple seconds. We could both make it out, basically. There's no concern for there not being enough time

or anything. The question is just, you know, does he secretly want me to die? Would he take some pleasure—however minute—in watching me suffer?"

"Oh. So it's just—so it's some kink thing, right? What, you don't think I could—"

"No. I don't take any pleasure in it." Grace was disgusted at the suggestion. "It makes me feel awful."

"Oh."

Max took her hand. Her fingers still shook slightly. This is not the psyche of someone with such deplorable spreadsheet habits, he thought.

"Grace, I think—I think you're a very lovable person," he told her, confidentially, achieving a sincere expression. "I don't know. I just wanted to tell you that."

"She had never touched me like that before and she hasn't since."

"What?"

"Nothing. It's a quote from something. This old book, like 19th century old."

"Would I know it?"

"No. Probably not." Grace looked at him. "Unless someone gave it to you as a gift"

He pulled her close. Her hair was a wilderness of knots. She lay in his arms and with caressing hands he read in terror.

For Maggie

Oh, but that bird. That stupid beautiful bird. A bird like that, they ought to lock her away, praise lobotomy, exorcism, violent peace. I ought to brave the pigs, say fuck it, ditch the car, run to the yard and hold my arms out shivering, tell that bird I was an angel once, hysterical in my own right and damned to contrite benediction, good behavior, polite submission. I am in love now. I am going to crash someone's beloved jeep into a vacant church, tell Jesus thanks but no thanks, I'll take my chances with the good Lord and his pristine ways and I will drive right off a cliff, feel the sand with glass fingers and copper toes and I will thank the water, the wind, I will scream just like that bird, I will not go quietly, I will carry you far away from here to the birch tree on Mineral Springs, strut by the jewelry store, gallery, fake diner with the cup of stars. I will open my jaw to that blue sky, slit the teeth off a cloud, I will leave you alone here by the wooden stars and you will thank me someday. Someday, you will thank me.

Acknowledgements

"elegy for unknown recipient" draws on themes, narrative, and characters depicted in Natalie Beach's essay "I Was Caroline Calloway." The subject line "i wish i knew if you kept me?" is taken from a letter of Emily Dickinson's, as is the line "if i built my house i should like to call you."

The title "The Untitled Fan Applauds the Grace of Epithet" is a line from Baron Wormser's "In Baseball."

The title "*The great abundance and overlapping orbits of asteroids suggests that disruptive collisions"* is taken from John A. Wood's *The Solar System.*

"So Soft" borrows a line from Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons.*

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